

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

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P R 100937Z MAY 74

FM AMCONSUL HONG KONG

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 692

INFO USLO PEKING

AMEMBASSY TAIPEI

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L HONG KONG 5249

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT CH

SUBJ: STATUS OF CHOU EN-LAI

REF: PEKING 0766

SUMMARY. CHOU EN-LAI'S ABSENCE FROM SENGHOR'S BANQUET MAY 9 AND THE CHINESE EXPLANATION THAT HE WAS FEELING UNWELL BECAUSE OF HIS OLD AGE, MAY FIT WITH OTHER RECENT CHANGES IN THE PREMIER'S PUBLIC APPEARANCES. THE EVENT IS LIKELY TO PROMPT SOME NEW CALCULATIONS IN CHINA AND ABROAD OF HOW LONG AND HOW MUCH HE CAN INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENTS IN CHINA. END SUMMARY.

1. WHILE THERE ARE NO GROUNDS TO DOUBT THE CHINESE STATEMENT TO PEKING NEWSMEN THAT CHOU'S ABSENCE FROM SENGHOR'S MAY 9 BANQUET WAS DUE TO HIS FEELING UNWELL "BECAUSE OF HIS OLD AGE" (REFTEL), SOME SUBTLE CHANGES IN THE PREMIER'S PUBLIC APPEARANCE-
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ANCES HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED IN THE RECENT WEEKS.

2. THE CHANGES NOW APPEAR TO HAVE BEGUN WITH THE VISIT APRIL 1 OF KHIEU SAMPHAN, WHEN NCNA REPORTED THAT THE "CHINESE PARTY AND GOVERNMENT LEADERS" ACCOMPANIED THE GUESTS IN REVIEWING THE AIRPORT HONOR GUARD. THE PREVIOUS PATTERN HAD BEEN TO DESCRIBE CHOU'S LEADING ROLE IN THE HONORS; FOR EXAMPLE, ON THE OCCASION OF THE NYERERE VISIT (NCNA MARCH 25). WRITING ABOUT THE SENGHOR ARRIVAL, NCNA REPEATED THE NEW, COLLECTIVE "LEADERS" FORMULATION.

3. ANOTHER CHANGE WHICH BEGAN WITH KHIEU SAMPHAN AND WAS REPEATED WITH SENGHOR IS THE PROMINENCE GIVEN BY NCNA TO VICE PREMIER LI HSIEN-NIEN'S PARTICIPATION WITH CHOU IN THE SUBSTANTIVE TALKS. CONTRARY TO ITS USUAL APPROACH OF MENTIONING ONLY CHOU IN THE HEADLINE, NCNA HAS ADDED LI'S NAME.

4. ANOTHER CHANGE ORIGINATED WITH THE SENGHOR VISIT WHEN LI JOINED CHOU AND EANG HUNG-WEN IN MAO'S MEETING WITH THE VISITOR. CHOU HAD NOT PREVIOUSLY BEEN SECONDED BY ONE OF HIS VICE PREMIERS ON SUCH OCCASIONS. AN IMPRESSION CONVEYED BY THIS IS THAT CHOU HAS A CLOSE AIDE IN ATTENDANCE AT HIS ELBOW.

5. NONE OF THESE CHANGES WOULD BE INCONSISTENT WITH AILMENTS AND AGING ON CHOU'S PART. THE PRESS OF WORK HAS INCREASED WITH THE HEAVY SCHEDULE OF FOREIGN VIP VISITS AND THE CONCERNS OF THE INTERNAL POLITICAL MOVEMENT. AND FOR OVER A YEAR NOW THERE HAVE BEEN INDICATIONS THAT THE PREMIER CARRIED TOO MUCH OF A BURDEN AND THAT SOME OF HIS DUTIES WERE BEING TRANSFERRED TO OTHER SHOULDERS. TENG HSIAO-PING IN PARTICULAR HAS EMERGED AS AN ALTERNATE. AT THE SAME TIME, FOLLOWING THE TENTH PARTY CONGRESS LAST YEAR AND AS THE CURRENT POLITICAL STRUGGLE GAINED MOMENTUM, WE HAVE NOTED A NUMBER OF INSTANCES IN WHICH CHOU APPEARED TO DEFER TO OR SHARE THE LIMELIGHT WITH OTHER REGIME FIGURES. A MORE COLLECTIVE APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP PROTOCOL WOULD ALSO BE CONSISTENT AT THIS TIME WITH EFFORTS TO SHOW TOP LEVEL UNITY.

6. COMMENT. CHOU'S HEALTH AND AGING, WHICH DOUBTLESS ENTER INTO THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN CHINA, MAY WELL COME MORE TO THE FRONT NOW THAT THIS HAS BEEN HIGHLIGHTED BY HIS ABSENCE AT THE BANQUET. IT IS LIKELY TO PROMPT SOME NEW CALCULATIONS--
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IN CHINA AND ABROAD--- OF HOW LONG AND HOW MUCH HE CAN INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENTS, AND IT DOES POINT UP THE NEED TO LOOK BEYOND HIM AS WELL AS MAO FOR NEW LEADERS, IN THE NEAR FUTURE.
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